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Home Escape Planning and Practice

Letter to the Editor

If a fire broke out in your home, do you know how much time you would have to get out? Unfortunately, no one knows for sure. While most people feel safe in their homes, the reality is that home fires are much more common than you might think. There were nearly 4,300 home fires reported in 2007 in Indiana, resulting in approximately 100 Hoosier deaths.

In a perfect world, we would be able to prevent all home fires. In reality, we can be vigilant, but there are no guarantees. Any emergency can affect one's ability to think clearly, but during a fire, smoke and other physical factors can literally inhibit your ability to react.

The theme for Fire Prevention Week (October 5-11, 2008) this year is "Prevent Home Fires," and focuses on preventing the leading causes of home fires – cooking, heating and electrical equipment, and smoking materials.

While the statistics are daunting, most home fires are easily preventable when we narrow our focus and take personal steps to increase our safety. Working smoke alarms and fire escape planning and practice are integral to keeping your family safe, but another element that you may want to add to your safety system is home fire sprinklers. Because they react so quickly, fire sprinkler systems can dramatically reduce the heat, flames and smoke produced in a fire. When sprinklers are present, the chances of dying are reduced by more than one-half and the average property loss per fire is cut by one-third to two-thirds, compared to fires where sprinklers are not present.

There are also a number of simple steps that you can put into action to keep your home safe from fire:

- **Cooking:** Stay in the kitchen when you are frying, grilling, or broiling food. If you leave the kitchen for even a short period of time, turn off the stove.
- **Heating:** Keep all things that can burn, such as paper, bedding or furniture, at least 3 feet away from heating equipment.
- **Electrical:** Replace cracked and damaged electrical cords; use extension cords from temporary wiring only. Consider having additional circuits or receptacles added by a qualified electrician.
- **Smoking:** if you smoke, smoke outside; wherever you smoke, use deep, sturdy ashtrays.

Preparing for the unexpected is difficult, but when it comes to home fires, minutes, even seconds, can mean the difference between life and death. That's why having a well-practiced fire escape plan is vital to the safety of your family.

To get you and your family started in planning a home fire escape, follow these tips:

- Install a smoke alarm on every level of your home and have one inside each bedroom and outside of each sleeping area. For the best protection, interconnect alarms so that when one sounds, they all sound.
- Test smoke alarms at least once a month.
- Replace batteries in smoke alarms at least twice a year. Plan on replacing the batteries when you change your clocks for daylight saving time.
- Develop a fire escape plan that identifies two ways out of each room and a family meeting place outside. Once outside, never return inside the house.
- Make sure your plan allows for any specific needs in your household. If everyone knows what to do, everyone can get out quickly.
- Practice using the plan at least twice a year.
- Some children and adults may not awaken to the sound of the smoke alarm. Designate someone to wake up each person in the household.
- Remove any items that may block doors or windows in your home. Make sure when arranging furniture and other items that you're not blocking doors or windows. They could keep you from escaping in the event of a home fire.
- Be sure to remove a pile of toys or other items in front of a doorway that can block your escape route and be a threat to the safety of you and your family.

We want to encourage all Hoosiers to be prepared. Currently, only 35% of U.S. households have a well-practiced plan in place for escaping home fires. The Indiana Department of Homeland Security and the State Fire Marshal encourage families to make a fire escape plan and practice it. Fire is unpredictable, but preparation in the form of a well-practiced escape plan can help keep you and your family safe, and potentially save lives.

Sincerely,

James Greeson
State Fire Marshal
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